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The Modern Need of the Ideal.

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The Modern Need of the Ideal.

An Address

Delivered at the Seventh Annual Salon of the

Woman's Literary Club of Baltimore

June the 2nd, 1896.

By the President

Mrs. Lawrence Turnbull.

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Nor knowest thou what argument
Thy life to thy neighbor's creed hath lent.
All are needed by each one;
Nothing is fair or good alone.

—*Emerson.*

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AS the time drew near for this anniversary address, which it has been your wont to claim and my privilege to give before you, the question naturally arose in my mind as to what part your leader should now hold in the literary working of an association so successfully specialized into interested groups, under capable chairmen, and working with enthusiasm in the precise lines for which we have been striving during the years of our membership. But—dwelling upon the question—it becomes quite plain that the more we specialize the more is it necessary that a strong central aim should weave a harmony from the work

of the several groups, if we would win an influence equal to the full force of the whole. Otherwise, the whole will not be more than the parts.

Constantly, then—as by our stronger work we deserve a stronger influence—should we remind ourselves of the central, informing spirit that should produce this unity.

What is this spirit, or atmosphere? Is it wholly one of investigation in the various lines that attract us, to the end of more accurate knowledge only? Then why a Woman's Club, with its few hours and its handful of students, dealing with specialties for which universities are far better equipped?

Does our title hold any hint that we are to strive tacitly, if not specifically, for some special good to woman in our literary work—that we are, in some sense, to uphold those qualities which are essentially womanly—not necessarily attributes of women only, nor sought for as differentiating them from men—but that we are to emphasize, as opportunity may offer here, those gifts and qualities which conduce to a nobler womanhood? SURELY.

Then, as a Woman's Literary Club, this purpose should fix our *point of view* in our contact with Literature.

From this point of view the question broadens at once, touching vital interests, clearing space for everything that is strong and beautiful and true; for we will not give up the claim that woman's part in life should be the Ideal or Spiritual—however darkly these Nineteenth Century influences hint of lower standards for the ideal life by exalting the practical beyond its due, by urging that an advance is made in the nobility of life and the greatness of woman's sphere when she holds a larger part in its material on-goings, by daring to assume that the *material* suffices for the higher good and that all questionings may be satisfied by scientific investigations.

Hence Realism—as the perfect in art!

Hence doctrines of Work and Equality—as solving our social problems!

Hence Science—as the solution or annihilation of Faith!

Hence Philology in Literature—with its conclusions, so patiently wrought for, so cold in returns of beauty, instead of the vitalizing study of the soul of poetry!

But if these are the darker hints of a time full of great possibilities, all the more should the influence of woman be

exerted upon the ideal side; all the more should she jealously claim and fill her part in life—for never was it more needed, more strenuously marked out for her, and by these very causes.

We have found, then, a definite point of view from which to approach Literature. Let us call it *The Modern Need of the Ideal.* It should fashion our standards, determine our criticisms, and color our writings.

In the statements just made our quarrel is, of course, only with the *over*due claims of Realism, or Work, or Equality, or Science, to its share of power in coping with the problems of life; and those who hold these doctrines, as stated, miss the larger views. The catholic spirit grants the necessity of a faultless technique in perfect art, but this is often the only claim of the realist.

The catholic spirit holds each faithful worker in honor, wherever his work may be; it acknowledges all possibilities of equality, none the less because, with its higher ideals, it recognizes also the value of the greater gifts that come to the few in the elevation and well-being of the race—a good undreamed of on the lower plane.

The catholic spirit reverently yields a large domain to Science, accepting as absolute its proof, reserving only things spiritual as beyond its province. It is the scientist alone, in his supremest claim, who asserts that nothing *is* which is not susceptible of his demonstration.

In speaking of what he terms the "personal equation of the age," a knowledge of which he considers necessary to those who are striving for influence, Dr. van Dyke tells us that one of the best means of obtaining this knowledge it through literature, "not that highly specialized and more or less technical variety of literature which is produced expressly for certain classes of readers, but literature in its broader sense, as it appeals to cultivated and intelligent people in general, including contemporary poetry and fiction, popular philosophy and diluted science. This kind of literature is the efflorescence of the Zeitgeist. It is at once a product and a cause of the temperament of the age." (Dr. van Dyke, in *First Yale Lecture.*)

Realizing the enormous power of this "literature in its broader sense," it seems a small thing to ask that women—the women of any association—should stand for the things

that make for beauty—should cast all their influence upon the side of that which is sane and stimulating, which will foster beauty and strength and innocent pleasure—should confess to this *Modern Need of the Ideal.*

But this involves firm convictions, a reliance upon one's own judgment, with determination to abide by it; it leads *away* from popularity. We are instantly conscious of the spirit of the age.

There are fads and critics and favorites; there is the scoff at the emotional, with the lack of reverence that makes it brave to speak of beautiful things. There is the slow fading of some sweet traditions and the incoming of another code for women; above all, there is a loud voicing of some theories which are not beautiful, through noise of which the gentler tones are scarcely audible. There is the restless craving of the age for popularity, which often makes cold listeners of our friends, while—quite unconsciously perhaps—the restlessness frets our judgments and tempts us to approve less than the best.

But a little courage will marvelously clear our vision. Standards and ideals belong to the higher or spiritual side

of life, where best *is* best, without time or fashion. All gifts and qualities of womanhood that have ever been truly good are good still, however superseded by the newer mode. All literature and art that have ever been actually beautiful are beautiful still. Every artist of the past who has truly lived his art life is living still—in that great *Now* which holds only immortal names—and his work, in some measure, however little, has added a deathless stroke to our wealth of gafnered beauty. But all artistic work must be estimated in its own atmosphere to yield its full meaning—an interpretation impossible except to liberal culture—and these scattered elements of beauty must be conserved, from age to age, that ideals may grow with the development of the race.

"Literature in its noblest form is one vast monument to the worth of human life ; indeed, interest in life and reverence for it lie at the heart of exalted genius. Without them the noblest work would be impossible," says Dr. Gordon. "In the reverent love of these unfathomable meanings literature works, and this homage of literature to life is a supreme attestation to the worth of human exist-

ence." And again: "The facts of human life are symbols. For unloving eyes they have no meaning, or only a slight one; but for the inspired heart they shine with celestial significance."

We need not seek to multiply such pleas for the treasuring of the ideal in our literary associations; we know that it is by our attitude rather than by our attainment in any department that we may hope to make ourselves felt. In literature, as in life, this should be the woman's province, and we may be sure that in this day of progress this note of freshness, of warmth, of spiritual charm, is a distinct need. Though the minds are strong and many which assume that the modern world has reached by positive paths beyond this need, *it is not true:* and those who make this assumption only do not realize its falseness because they have not yet reached the higher plane of thought: they *think* they have no need of Idealism because they have not attained to, nor comprehended it; but idealists *know* that they need Realism, because they have gone beyond and included it in their attainment, and theirs is the broader platform. We may go further, taking Realism and Idealism as attitudes,

not only in literature and all the fine arts, but in life—and we shall see how, in this ceaseless contest between the old and the new, which just at this time shapes itself so definitely in the question of the woman of to-day versus the woman of the past, it is the fear of losing this attitude of idealism which makes strong men bitter against modern progress for the women of their homes. They are not afraid of more strength, physical, or intellectual, of more knowledge, of a more complete development—they do not grudge them any grace, or gladness: but the displacement of grace by knowledge would make the hearth less charming, and it is for those who care for progress in its truest and broadest sense to keep the fireside a sanctuary of ideals. And that men may not look *back*, nor *down* upon ideals, ideals must grow, both in breadth and beauty, to keep pace with our swiftly advancing age: and growth is the test of their vitality and sufficiency.

The idealist can have no issue with those who plead for the precision of method, the carefulness of study which Realism has introduced into Art. The value of these things cannot be overestimated; for it must be confessed that a

certain slovenliness and inadequacy have too often been faults of the ideal and spiritual school—in art as in thought. This is, doubtless, one reason why the productions of the ideal school have not always carried the weight to which their matter entitles them. It will continue to be so—increasingly, according to the more definite methods, intellectual and scientific, which keep pace with the rapid development of our age—unless the fact is recognized by those who assert that Idealism is higher than Realism; and unless they also make themselves artists in the lower plane, that they may perfectly set forth the higher phase. All the more because of the subtlety and elusiveness of their ideal, they must master definite methods of technique—submitting here to the most searching criticism—so perfect should be the art that may adequately suggest a spiritual conception. But in every ideal conception, where there is also trained artistic judgment with mastery of definite methods, the artist will inevitably reject certain hardnesses of manner which produce an inartistic obviousness, and a style of his own will result—original without affectation, if his thought be original—simple and adequate, in measure to his nearness

to true art, and endowed with life in that proportion. This ideal style will belong to no special age, but to *art* in every age; and, growing out of its theme, will be always fresh, having distinction in treatment.

There is an attempt among modern writers to give to Realism an interpretation which changes its very essence, which seems to me an unfair use of words—an attempt which has doubtless been made because Realism ranks so high in the artistic world, that no word-artist can afford to grant it less than it deserves. But, if we would be artists in words, we also must strenuously insist upon meanings; and we are justified in saying that Realism and Idealism are, in their very natures, opposite—the one being a presentation of things seen, the other an interpretation of things unseen. The greater—the Spiritual—may include the lesser—the Real—in its service of interpretation, as one climbs by a visible pathway to invisible heights; but Realism ceases to be Realism, in spirit, when it assumes the spiritual and climbs to its interpretation, while an idealist can never be satisfied with any presentation of life that does not take cognizance of its higher and immortal side.

So sentences like the following, which I quote from a widely read volume that has been issued during the past year—a book very noble in its trend—must lead to confusion or unfairness of thought.

"In its highest demands this Realism would insist upon the spiritual genesis of all artistic representation—upon their faithfulness to an everlasting type, upon their sincerity and spontaneity, and upon their vital sympathy and humor, so that they shall, like all Nature's growths, have the warmth of the sunshine and the freshness of the dew. While holding to reality, these representations transcend not only all mental anticipation, but the real suggestion, having, like all unfoldings of Nature, aspiration, culmination, and, as a final issue, surprises." (*God in His World.*)

To condense such a claim in the fewest words, it is simply putting Realism for truth—which is misleading; for although truth is the most important factor, both in the visible and the invisible world, yet, wherever there is a spiritual truth shadowed forth by a visible presentation, Realism alone will miss the subtle glory, while wondering that we ask for more than the substance which it has presented.

In a quaint old village church, on the banks of the Avon, dear to literature, there is a rude effigy which stands for the portrait of our great "Master Will." It is a face so singularly free from any trace of emotion or thought, that it would seem impossible for any artist to compass such a feat with any presentation of human lineaments. It is true that its artistic quality is not of the highest, so it would be unfair to take it as an example of Realism in its extremest sense, yet it might serve for an illustration, for memories come thronging of pictures and images at far more rudimentary stages of development—on the walls of the catacombs, or in ruined heathen temples before the Christian Era, which were often so crude as to be fairly grotesque, yet where there was always some emotional suggestion, however faint or unpleasant. But to find at the shrine of the Bard of Avon, keeping watch over the grave of the man who rules the intellectual world with growing empire, this image of a countenance more inscrutable than that of any Sphynx—not as of intention, but as guiltless of all thought or emotion—it was a very travesty on Realism and we could not accept it as Shakespeare's face.

Like realism, too, it suggested the thought that to those ruder images one might forgive grotesqueness and inadequacy, because of the limitation of power, since their art, though only nascent, displayed a feeling after an ideal, however imperfect. But the face of the soulless man brought weird and terrible suggestions—as of power, self-limited, below the attainable best: as of one who denied that man was more than an image and would place *form* higher than *soul*.

What are the signs of the day?

There has never been a time so fruitful in advances that make for man's material and moral welfare. In great discoveries; in multiplication of charities and the wide study of philanthropy as a science; in the increase of schools of learning and the sifting of knowledge, downward, through the masses; in freedom of discussions; in the extension of books and art; in sanitary progress; in comforts and luxuries scattered in the homes of the lower classes, with privileges of education and relaxation that never before existed: a generosity of endowments overcoming the evils of accumulated wealth; and a blossoming of æsthetic taste of which the benefits are free.

But there is also a quickening of faculty which threatens to overdo itself and weaken our mental activities; a pressure of every known force upon our over-strained life: the time is ruled by action rather than thought, and the sense of hurry in the air leaves scanty time for poetry and visions. In reaction from the past, the popular mood of learning is for knowledge rather than culture; for tests, without emotions; and the tone of our universities is more often hard than mellow—when the great dreams of poets and seers are counted less worthy of study than geological formations or questions of philology.

We belong to the time and are glad and proud of its greatness. We do not stand aside with forboding criticsim, but we must use our faculty to recognize its dangers and hopefully add our little force to the world's most beautiful and needed work—the treasuring of ideals

We want *more* faith, *more* hope, *more* beauty—in the sense of a beauty that is holy. We want more leisure to apprehend these things, wherever we find them; we want a larger application of these visions to our lives; we want a quieter pulse; we want a larger trust in our creed, and

courage to proclaim it—that *the best shall ultimately prevail.*

Many noble voices give us strong sanctions for this hope—and the mark of the modern idealist is that the light upon the hills does not blind his eyes to the darker problems of life—his hope is not apart from them, but includes them in his vision of that ultimate time—and already, in many of the arts the sign on the horizon is of a spiritual advance.

Browning tells us:

"All we have willed or hoped, or dreamed of good shall exist;
Not its likeness but itself; no beauty, nor good, nor power
Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the melodist
When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.
The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too hard,
The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky,
Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard,
Enough that He heard it once; we shall hear it by and by."

Darwin counted it the loss of his life, that in the years he gave to his scientific researches, poetry ceased to charm him.

Cayley, the great mathematician, ranking first in his branch among the mathematicians of the world, and so

recognized by the most important foreign associations, is reputed by his devoted, child-like, Christian faith, to have done a nobler service for his land and his university than by the wonderful scientific *resumé* of the life-work that his dying hand left half-achieved.

Let me share with you a modern thought in this direction. "The freedom of a life nearer to natural impulse than to mental suggestion is always the hope of the world. We are forever over-estimating the value of intellectual culture."

It is still true, that unless, in a figurative sense, we "become as little children," we can enter no paradise of earth or heaven. So we must seek in culture the spontaneities of culture which reside in poetry, in beauty, in the emotional parts of our nature—the child-like, believing spirit. These we must hold to, for they are the wells that keep us strong, pure, sane and equal in the current of the rushing, stimulating, intellectual life of the day.

It is the extraordinary vigor of this intellectual pulse which accentuates the need of this tranquilizing ministry of the ideal: as aspiration, perpetual youth, child-likeness,

belong to this mood. It is, if you please, a survival of the dawn of life, when nature appeals to the child with fantastic imagery and glow of color; her moods are nearer to his own than in later conventional days, and the simplicity of his requirements brings frequent satisfactions.

Hence the exquisite joy some natures find in the beauty and glad-heartedness of little children, with their wise unworldliness, their naiveté, their implicit trust, their unconscious grace, the refreshment and help of their tender, loving presences—the greatness they often give us sight of.

Imagination belongs to youth; the force of the creative spirit wanes with age. In youth, too, aspiration is more stimulating, though later, it may become the constant atmosphere of some beautiful soul who has won calm out of the stress of living. But in youth it is felt as an impetus, while in the rare cases of the constant possession, it is to the beholder as a reward for faithful service, while the possessor, who does not know that it touches him with glory, only calls it "peace." We have never recognized this attainment in others without realizing it also as an inspiration, and with this rare temper there will always be found something of the spirit of youth.

This treasuring of the ideal keeps our sympathies warm so that we come in vital touch with the true wherever we find it. To know a man like Sidney Lanier, Professor Cayley, or Phillips Brooks, was a revelation of these possibilities which could scarcely be understood without some such human exemplification of the beauty of living by ideals, as these men did. At once the *best* in those who surrounded so magnetic a centre, leaped into life; the presence was instantly felt as inspirational, the men were so much greater than their words—raising souls by the largeness of their own.

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